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ABSTRACT

Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" and Holman Hunt's painting of the same subject are excellent examples of the value of exploring poetry through painting. One of the biggest questions raised in relation to the poem's theme is the problem of its ambiguity. By looking at the painting in class, one can sense the lack of definite boundaries between good and evil and between innocence and malice, while noting that the lady is both a dangerous nymph and a damsel in distress. Other features suggesting ambiguity are the mirror, its reflection of Lancelot, and classical and Christian symbols. From a discussion of different levels of meaning compressed typologically, one can branch out to a larger discussion of myth and the ideas about it and about cultural symbolism since the Victorian age. Another, much more concrete way of using the painting to get to the poem is to scrutinize the former's structure. When structure takes on spatial dimensions, it becomes easier to perceive. One can literally "see" how spatial organizing principles correspond to temporal ones--in this case the use of circles and the trine, or groups of three. After carefully exploring a painting's details, one can make inferences, then form generalizations and generate further research and speculation about painting, poem, and both their aesthetic and their historical contexts. (HTH)

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A Hunt for Tennyson: Teaching Poetry Through Painting

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A Hunt for Tennyson: Teaching Poetry Through Painting

"It is largely by observing themselves "get" ideas that students begin to understand the difference between facts and inferences" (Shaughnessy 246).

I don't know of a better way to "get" ideas about a single piece or a whole body of literature than to take a long, hard look at it.

But the next best way to get ideas about literature and possibly the best way to understand the difference between facts and inferences and to observe ourselves observing is to take a long, hard look at...painting.

I'm not interested in the various fallacious pitfalls in the ut-pictura-poesis approach, in the discussion of just how much a poem is like a painting, which has been the subject of many a work from Horace through Lessing up to the twentieth century. Notwithstanding this famous debate, as a teacher, I have the most practical advantages to gain by using a painting to lay the groundwork, prepare for a poem. A painting in front of our eyes can evoke associations and responses that are personal but also collective; individual, but nevertheless objective and verifiable to a reasonable extent. We can often surrender to what is concretely there in front of our eyes, in terms of shapes and colors, and then articulate our response to it more easily than we can to what is there in verbal form; when we analyze a painting we can become more conscious of being manipulated; when we talk

about the temporal vs. the spatial, we have a context-based comparison and contrast and a starting place for discussion. That discussion can take the form of brainstorming in writing or out loud without the pressure to be conclusive or exact; it is the kind of discourse Kinneavy calls dialogical, exploratory, free of rigid control (187).

As for brainstorming about a painting in order to get ideas about a verbal piece, Shaughnessy herself recommends making inferences "from non-print data at first so that the shift from observation to generalization is as sharply drawn as possible" (246).

Besides, to the objection that focusing our attention on the picture before we do on the words prejudices and preconditions us to see the poem in a certain way, I say this: Let's be honest. As reader-response criticism has helped us to admit, a literary work exists as much in our minds as it does on the page; every reader, whether imposing childhood fantasies and associations on the text or consciously following one critical school or another, brings with him/her a whole set of preconceptions, a mental framework that will absorb and adapt, in the interest of harmony, any new material it encounters (Tompkins ix-xxvi). Seeing things in our own way is an activity we cannot escape as human beings; we bring ourselves, our whole histories, to every moment in life as in art. All critics are "influenced," Tennyson's by Christian and Platonic doctrines, by Art for Art's sake, by Jungism, etc. My feeling is that

if we are inevitably doomed (or privileged) to see reality, which includes works of art, through our private focus, why not share at least a common lens, namely aesthetics: By conditioning ourselves to see one work of art from the perspective of another, we can, at least, block out some of the truly extra-artistic, and, at most, gain an insider's view of human creativity.

Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" and Holman Hunt's painting of it make excellent companions for and examples of such an endeavor. We know that Hunt made a small illustration of the poem for the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson and that twenty years later, between 1886 and 1905, he started making larger-scale paintings of the theme (Wood 109). In other words, the subject had a twenty-year incubation period in Hunt's mind--it would be safe to assume that he had a deep understanding of the poem and knew what he wanted to do with it. We also know that Hunt and Tennyson met several times to discuss specific illustrations as well as general principles in philosophy and art and that the poet felt satisfied with the illustration and considered it a genuine recreation of his work (Stevenson 14).

Historically, therefore, approaching the poem from the point of view of the painting is quite legitimate, but, again, more importantly, submerging ourselves in the ambiance of the canvas can lead us emotionally into the world of the living, breathing poem. It lets us concretely, almost viscerally, feel critical abstractions such as ambiguities,

circularities and paradoxes; moreover, after leading us into the works' own structural and thematic worlds, it can let us move into the cultural world from which they sprang. Here then, are a few example, some inferences and conclusions drawn from the analysis of my comparative pair.

One of the biggest questions raised in relation to the poem's theme is the problem of its open-ended ambiguity. What is reality and what is illusion? Is art superior or inferior to life, and is it compatible with it? Some critics view the work as a message about the tragic downfall of the pure artist (Tobias 10), of Tennyson's "Aesthetic Muse" (Cervo 18); others see it as an artistic and religious celebration of the mystery of life and death, a triumph of eternal life through art (Shannon 214); still others emphasize duality on the metaphysical, Platonic and sexual levels (Mosk-Packer 6-8).

In the classroom, instead of discussing the philosophy of metaphysical dualities, we can look at the painting, for, if we stare at it long enough, we'll soon sense a lack of definite boundaries between good and evil, innocence and malice, and we see that the Lady is both a dangerous nymph and a damsel in distress. Half of her, the half garbed in the Madonna's Lamentation robes, is in full light while the other half, sparkling with metallic blue scales associated with the seductive mermaid, is hidden in shadows. Her hair flows about sensuously, and her arms and feet are naked. She dwells in a fantastically rich, golden environment, yet she

is literally imprisoned by the thread of her dreams, caught in the web of her tapestry, her own magic circle. Is she unraveling or unraveling the thread? With her intense, almost hypnotic (and hypnotized!) gaze at the shadowy world at her feet, she seems the enchanted and enchantress at once. Is she a pure dove, a mystical bride of Christ, a martyred artist, or a femme fatale? If we take in all the details one by one, the painting will force us to accept the idea that she is all of the above.

Another excellent visual example of a paradoxical enigma posing more questions than answers is the mirror. On the one hand, it is a mirror because, in relation to the rectangular, three-dimensional, window above it, it seems a flat, ornamented glass and because it reflects the tapestry-globe, the urn and the dove. On the other hand, it is a window through which we see Lancelot riding in a ripe landscape, traversed by a river and a flying strand of the Lady's hair (or the "crack" in the mirror if you will). In the poem, a verbally multilayered effect is achieved through rich semantic resonances. In Part I, for example, the fields "lie" on either side of the river and "lie" because they deceptively "meet the sky." The island "imbowers" the Lady, suggesting shelter, retreat and seclusion as well as a closed, forbidden garden of love. Sometimes a whole cryptic line reads ambiguously as in Part 4, Stanza 2, where the Lady floats "like some bold seer in a trance,/ Seeing all his own mischance"--prophetically she sees all her tragedy, tragedy in

all and the tragedy of all! Adding to the ambiguity is the fact that she sees all "with a glassy countenance." Does she then have true vision into life (Camelot)? Is she still gazing at elusive reflections? Or perhaps the vision is a truer one than both of the above because it is inward and imaginative? As she dies, her eyes darken "wholly" but also "holy." In other words, her death is the final oblivion and the final apotheosis.

Lancelot, for his part, "muses," is "mused." Is he wondering at her appearance, unable to understand its meaning? Is he absorbed in deep thought? Is he inspired by her? What exactly is Lancelot's role?

In the painting he appears a tiny figure in the center of the canvas, but all throughout the work there are embodiments of him, particularly Classical and Christian emblems: the Christ child with the Virgin, St. George and the dragon, Hercules with his golden apples; all are crowned with golden halos and hold golden orbs. They are all literally in the background of the heroic Sir Lancelot. Hercules stole the golden apples from the Hesperides after crossing a mythic river, wrestling with Nereus, shooting the eagle to free Prometheus, fighting the guardian dragon, and tricking Atlas. In the Renaissance, the myth of Hercules was interpreted in terms of the temptation of Eve and the harrowing of hell by Christ (Mayerson 308-9). It also approximated the Christian legend of St. George, a soldier whose armor was emblazoned with a red cross, symbol of good

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triumphant over evil (the dragon), as well as the Arthurian tale of Lancelot, a holy quester for the Grail.

The Victorians were intrigued by what Hunt called "the marriage between the Gothic and the Renaissance" or the necessary union between polarized entities, dark and light forces (1: 138). In language and in art they wanted to restore the mystery of the sign, whether verbal or pictorial, by creating a modern equivalent for the ancient hieroglyph, a synthesis based on a myriad of cultural references and crossreferences, each packed with so many diverse and even divergent histories that a single meaning for it could no longer be possible. The figure of Lancelot, like those of Christ, Hercules and St. George, the Red-Cross Knight, offered them such an intriguing union, for they all shared an important mythic theme: Only by going through hell can the soul be cleansed; sin and temptation are the other side of the coin of purity, and one cannot be without the other; they are inseparable, and their identities, their contradictory essences mix and melt into each other in an eternal return.

Classical and Christian emblems coalesce even with pagan-primitive "pictographs" in the sexual allusions which abound in both poem and painting. Freudianism makes us quickly perceive the painting's positioning of a column and an unsheathed sword above an urn. Correspondingly, in the poem Lancelot is a "bow shot from her bower eaves," riding between the barley sheaves," a "bearded meteor" burning like a flame, a glittering sun god seducing the Lady out of her

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isolation. Again, he is many things in one--a worldly soldier, a lover, an Orphic singer, redeemer and redeemed, captivating the Lady's heart with his ringing armor and bridle (bridal) bells and with his baldric (an ornamental belt for a sword or a bugle).

From a discussion of different levels of meaning compressed typologically, one can branch out to a larger discussion of myth and the ideas about it and about cultural symbolism ever since the Victorian age. One of its greatest thinkers, Thomas Carlyle, wrote, "It is through symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works and has his being" (222). The artist's duty, according to Carlyle, is to exploit a nation's cultural symbols, or myths, for he serves as a Promethean "Maker," who creates from "the deep infinite faculties of man, his Fantasy and Heart" (225). Another giant of the age, John Ruskin, warned his public, "Never confuse a myth with a lie" and praised the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which he dubbed the "Mythic School," for seeking to teach the "spiritual truth of myths" (33: 294). Ruskin, who opposed such truths to scientific materialism, said, "Myths... are incomparably truer than the Darwinians... because they are the instinctive products of the natural human mind, conscious of certain facts relating to its fate and peace; and as unerring in that instinct as all other living creatures are in the discovery of what is necessary for their life" (26: 336).

Ruskin and contemporaries such as Anna Jameson seriously

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studied and collected examples of mythic iconography, anticipating the twentieth-century work of Sir James Frazer, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Alfred North Whitehead. Ruskin was especially interested in the Hercules-St. George type, writing in Queen of the Air, "Hercules was no dead hero.... He was the perpetual type and mirror of heroism, and its present and living aid against every ravenous form of human trial and pain" (19: 299). The Victorians, thus, were the first to take the universality of mythic thinking seriously. (Unfortunately, they relied on philological rather than psychological evidence, but that is another matter which deserves its own discussion.)

Another, much more concrete way of using the painting to get to the poem is to scrutinize the former's structure, for when structure takes on spatial dimensions, it becomes easier to perceive; we can literally "see" how spatial organizing principles correspond to temporal ones. In our case, they are two--which ultimately fall into one category--the circle and the trine. The painting, in effect, is a tapestry woven of interlocking circles, often repeated theme-variation style, in groups of threes: the medallions on the rug, the round loom and tapestry, the picture, the mirror, the halos, the golden spheres, apples, yarn balls, the round urn on its round base. The Lady herself seems caught in a swirling motion, and the loose threads seem to fly round and round. In the poem, both structure and narrative move in circles of threes: three paces for the Lady, and three things she sees

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before the mirror cracks (the water lily, the helmet, the plume); three times three lines in each three-rhymed stanza. Each stanza, ciruclating between "Camelot" and "Shalott" refrains, echoes itself and is, in turn, echoed by every other stanza. In short, as Hunt's four-sided painting contains a triadic world of magic circles, Tennyson's four sections hold round verse forms and, semantically, an island with a bower-tower.

What is the significance of this? How does this structure support the theme or the intention of the works? Again we go back to the Victorian, early modern, vision--a deliberately conscious vision of synthesis where opposites coalesce and past, present, and future dissolve into eternity; a mythic vision, in other words, expressed since ancient "naive" times by the spiritual symbol of unity, the circle, and in Christian thought, by the perfect symmetry of three circles, the Trinity. We find this vision of sythesis in every small detail of the works. In the painting, they are present even in the smallest details such as the architectural styles presented: Classical columns merge with Gothic arches; the loom has three unique period feet, each belonging to a different time and mentality yet all supporting the same world on a tapestry ring. Tennyson constucts a modern hybrid from archaic, primitive forms--the tetrametric, narrative ballad, the French ballade (with its double-refrain), and other French "round" forms (rondeau, roundel, roundelay).

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To conclude, after carefully exploring a painting's details, we can make inferences, then form generalizations and generate further research and speculation about painting, poem, and both their aesthetic and historical contexts. The painting lets us acquire meaning for ourselves by making our aesthetic intuitions give birth to ideas, formulating our wonder into searching questions. In the classroom, when we dissect structure or dissertate on the death-rebirth cycle, our words are in danger of falling like sapless autumn leaves on students' ears. To resurrect their green, it's always good to replant them--in the earthiness of paintings.

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